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# Euroscepticism: A Mobilising Appeal? Not for Everyone!<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the changing role of the EU agenda in Slovak politics. It identifies old and newly emerging faces of Euroscepticism and compares them with general theoretical concepts. Furthermore, it asks to what extent Eurosceptical appeals mobilised Slovak voters in the European Parliament (EP) elections of 2014 and whether Eurosceptical parties represent a meaningful electoral choice for voters. In the past, many analyses have provided evidence that the European agenda is not salient and the EU political arena is perceived as one where there is less at stake. Nevertheless, the economic crisis and so-called Greek bailout were followed by a rise in Euroscepticism and EU-criticism. In some EU countries, this enhanced voter mobilisation in the EP elections. In others – including Slovakia – we saw not only a significant decline in electoral turnout but relatively poor results for Eurosceptical parties as well. This study identifies the factors behind abstention and explores voting patterns in this specific second-order election in Slovakia. Moreover, it investigates how the parties are perceived in terms of their positions on EU integration and the potential impact on voter choices. I conclude that the EU agenda is still not the deciding factor for voters even in the case of EP elections. Eurosceptical appeals are less mobilising in this context, and the public sees no differences among parties' stances on the EU.*

**Keywords:** *European Parliament elections, Euroscepticism, Eurosceptical appeals, electoral turnout, abstention factors, party and public positions on the EU agenda*

## Introduction

‘This time it’s different!’ announced a major mobilisation campaign by European Parliament for the 2014 elections. Under “different,” we may understand the changes brought to the EP by the Lisbon Treaty: more competencies, and

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in particular, a closer connection between European voters' decision and the filling of the position of head of the European executive. The 2014 EP elections were, thus, expected to be more personalised, but also – due to the economic crisis and increased Euroscepticism across the EU – more politicised. The 'this time it's different' slogan seemed to foreshadow greater interest and a higher election turnout.

This was confirmed in several member states (Great Britain, Greece, Romania and Lithuania) albeit at the price of a rise in support for Eurosceptical and Euro-critical parties. In many Central and East European countries, however, the trend in voter participation moved in the opposite direction. With voter turnout at 13%, Slovakia again set a record for non-participation, surpassing its own lows in 2004 (17%) and 2009 (19.6%). This "abstention champion" was closely followed by the Czech Republic where participation reached only 18% (five years earlier, it had been 28%), Poland (23%) and the EU family's newest member, Croatia (25%). Ten years after entering this prestigious club and a quarter century after the fall of undemocratic regimes when a "return to Europe" was a yearned for goal, the majority of citizens in this part of the EU stayed away from the polls.

As we have noted, Euroscepticism presented a successful mobilising strategy in this election more than at any time before. The troublesome ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the consequences of economic crises, the bailout and other incentives related to the urgent state of the euro – all these factors contributed to the eruption of Eurosceptical parties in 2014. In most cases, this was right-wing Euroscepticism closely connected to nationalism, xenophobia and anti-immigration slogans.<sup>2</sup> In journalistic jargon, the EP election results were even labelled a 'Eurosceptic "earthquake"' rocking EU elections.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in some countries including Slovakia, these Eurosceptical appeals did not mobilise voters. Various nationalist and Eurosceptical parties – both old and new – fell well below the 5% threshold and had only very marginal support. The Slovak National Party (SNS), in particular, failed to defend its one seat in the EP, receiving only 3.6% of valid votes. Similarly, the feared right-wing extremist

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2 To name only the most relevant examples across the EU: the National Front in France won 25% of votes and electoral support for the UKIP grew by 12 percentage points, making it the strongest party in the UK, with almost 27% of votes. The Danish Eurosceptical People's Party also recorded one of the best election results for a party of this type; with 27% of votes, it doubled its MEP numbers and is now the biggest Danish party in the EP. Within the post-Communist countries, Hungary's extreme-right party Jobbik was most successful, receiving 15% of votes. For more details, see <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html> (8 July 2015).

For the purpose of this study, whose focus is primarily Slovakia, we do not deal with radical left-wing Eurosceptical appeals. In the 2014 EP elections, however, it was above all the Greek far-left party Syriza which made a breakthrough with 26% of votes.

3 Eurosceptic 'earthquake' which rocks EU elections." BBC New Europe: available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27559714> (26 May 2014).

People's Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), led by Marián Kotleba (Governor of the Banská Bystrica region), claimed only 1.7% of votes.<sup>4</sup>

This study examines the changing role of the EU agenda in Slovak politics: it identifies old and newly emerging faces of Euroscepticism and compares them drawing on general theoretical concepts. It also analyses these faces of Slovak Euroscepticism using party manifestos for the 2012 general election and the 2014 EP election. Based on these analyses of the election results and the findings of a post-election survey, this work asks to what extent Eurosceptical appeals mobilised Slovak voters in the 2014 EP election and whether Eurosceptical parties are a meaningful electoral choice for voters. This research also identifies the factors behind abstention and explores voting patterns in this particular second-order election in Slovakia. Moreover, it questions how the parties are perceived in terms of their positions on EU integration, the congruence between voter and party perceptions and how all these issues might affect voting choices.

## How Should We Conceptualise Euroscepticism?

The term “Euroscepticism” is notoriously elusive, broad and difficult to conceptualise, let alone to measure. Euroscepticism was initially a distinctly British phenomenon; it expressed British distance and “otherness” in relation to Continental Europe and/or the project of EU integration. A more critical European discourse emerged during the debates over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990 s, and since those years, a variety of forms of Euroscepticism have emerged and started to have increasing prominence in the EU member states. Among the first studies attempting to conceptualise this very complex and fuzzy concept were works by Paul Taggart (1998), Aleks Szczerbiak (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002) and Kopecky and Mudde (2002). As Sofia Vasilopoulou rightly points out: ‘As a result of this implicit exceptionality and novelty of the phenomenon, the literature has mostly treated it [Euroscepticism] as a “dependent” variable. In doing so, it has used the theoretical and analytical tools available in order to “understand” its nature’ (2013: 153).

In their formative work (2002), Kopecky and Mudde set out two dimensions to allow for a more precise understanding of parties’ positions vis-à-vis the EU and Europe: 1. diffuse support for European integration at the level of ideas and ideals; 2. specific support for the EU at the level of practice. By combining them, we can classify four theoretical types: Euro-enthusiasts; Euro-pragmatists; Euro-sceptics and Euro-rejects, where Euro-sceptics are a combination of EU-pessimists at the level of EU practice and Europhiles at that of ideas. Even a glance at this typology

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4 Among the more marginal nationalistic and Eurosceptical parties, we can include Nation and Justice (which won 1.38% of votes in the election), Law and Justice (1.66%), the Slovak People's Party (0.46%) and the Christian Slovak National Party (0.64%). All in all, 29 parties and 333 candidates contested the EP election in Slovakia.

makes clear that there are many different empirical cases which would not fit into this scheme; still, this typology enables us to begin sorting them out.

Taggart and Szczerbiak have distinguished between hard and soft Euroscepticism (2002), while Chris Flood has identified a six-point continuum along which party positions towards the EU may be situated (Flood 2002). Its poles are rejectionist vs. maximalist, with revisionist, minimalist, gradualist and reformist positions situated in between.

Though the above classifications have focused primarily on party-based Euroscepticism, Eurosceptic views can also be analysed from a public opinion perspective. Sorensen (2008) identifies four broad ideal types of public Euroscepticism. According to her analyses, Euroscepticism can have an economic character or be sovereignty-based (reflecting the claim that EU cooperation should not challenge national sovereignty). The third type is labelled “democratic Euroscepticism” and has to do with the democratic deficit associated with EU-level governance. Finally, the fourth type is more political and evaluates the EU according to broadly the same cleavages that characterise national politics (Sorensen 2008: 8).

Sorensen tested these types of public Euroscepticism in three countries – Denmark, France and the UK – highlighting that Danish and British societies are characterised by a strong sovereignty-based Euroscepticism (combined also with an economic one in the UK’s case) while the French share a strong social Euroscepticism (Sorensen 2008: 9).

Analogously, we can distinguish the sources of Euroscepticism in terms of whether they are based on party or public attitudes. McLaren, for instance, separates economic, cultural and institutional factors and points to two distinct paths: one rooted in cultural threats and the other in perceived economic losses. Further on, she notes that institutional distrust motivates Euroscepticism. According to her evidence, while the direct effect of institutional trust runs through EU institutions, EU and national institutions tend to be distrusted together (McLaren 2002: 513).

All these categories are based on EU-related developments in the older member states. They are also partially applicable in countries that joined the club in 2004 or later. We may recall the pre-accession expectations in regard to Eurosceptical positions in post-Communist countries. Cas Mudde, for example, conceptualised the potential conflict in terms of a centre-periphery cleavage. Shortly before the Big Bang enlargement in 2004, he expected that ‘one possible way in which EU accession could influence party competition in the new member states is in transforming the already present regional divide into a full populist, anti-EU center-periphery cleavage’ (Mudde 2004: 2). Furthermore, he pointed out that Euroscepticism would mix populism with frustration at the periphery. The centre-periphery divide and a national populist anti-EU position would also make for a perfect combination because it had links back to the clas-

sic populist discourse of the 1920 s and 1930 s in this region. That discourse had posited that the key struggle was between rural and “national” people, and the urban and cosmopolitan elite (Mudde 2004: 7).

However, the model of winners-losers of integration and a centre-periphery divide did not work very well, at least not in Slovakia: people in the poorer regions saw EU funds as a means to achieve balance with more developed regions, not to mention the capital. In addition, the Europhoria was general and widespread across very different social environments. Hardly any EU-sceptical feeling could be mobilised before the economic crises and the “Greek” bailout debate, which emerged in 2010. Although radical right-wing and nationalistic parties presented EU integration as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural identity, these appeals had very limited impact on the public mood.

Of course, there are variations in the salience of EU integration across the Union; factors like low-level EU politicisation and the significance of Euro-scepticism strongly depend on individual national party systems and national contexts. In 2008, shortly before the outbreak of the economic crisis, Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak identified three categories of countries based on national surveys: these were states where EU integration was 1) of hardly any relevance; 2) the subject of an open, coherent and intense political debate (the Czech Republic, for example, was included in this category); 3) the subject of a highly incoherent and changing debate (Taggart – Szczerbiak 2008). Most Central and Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, belong in the third category (Hartleb 2011: 24).

We turn now to the forms of Euroscepticism active on the recent Slovakian political scene. We will focus on party-based Euroscepticism and analyse this using the concepts set out above.

## Emerging Faces of Euroscepticism in Slovakia

When it comes to public perceptions of EU membership and participation in the EP elections, Slovakia presents an interesting case. Though it has one of the most EU-phile publics across the EU-28,<sup>5</sup> the country has historically recorded

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5 For instance, in autumn 2011, 48% of Slovaks expressed their trust in the EU while the average in the EU-27 was just 34%. ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76\\_fact\\_sk\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_fact_sk_en.pdf), 8 July 2015). In another example, in the spring of 2010, 78% of Slovaks believed that their country was benefitting from EU membership whereas the EU-27 average figure was 53%. Moreover, 59% of the Slovak public thought that EU membership was a good thing but the same question was answered positively by only 49% of EU-27 citizens ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73\\_fact\\_sk\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73_fact_sk_en.pdf), 8 July 2015).

We can also look at the more recent results of a Standard Eurobarometer survey conducted in autumn 2014. These findings indicate that after a brief downswing, the tide is turning: trust in the EU and its institutions has increased since the last survey in spring 2014; Slovak citizens feel that they are EU citizens to a greater extent than average EU citizens do (the figure was 73% in Slovakia compared to 63% across the EU28). The indicator “confidence in the EU” was also higher in Slovakia than the EU average, and

the lowest turnout in all EP elections. The country's integration trajectory drew attention in the late 1990s when the country was labelled the "black hole" of Central Europe. After 1998, however, it was seen to be back on the "right track" and busily catching up with its initially more successful neighbours. Within a very short time, Slovakia, thus, turned from a "troubled candidate" into a "loyal member," meaning that it could be characterised by its "policy-taking" rather than "policy-setting" position. However, the image of the good pupil changed dramatically in October 2011 when Slovak parliament was the only parliament in the Eurozone to vote against measures to bolster the powers of the Eurozone bailout fund – a step seen as vital to combat the bloc's debt crisis. In fact, the impression created was rather misleading: only one of the governing coalition's four parties, the neoliberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), had opposed the bailout and abstained<sup>6</sup> while the other three had voted in favour. The largest opposition party, Smer-Social Democracy also supported the bailout but abstained when then Prime Minister Iveta Radičová made the vote one of confidence in the government in the hope of bringing SaS into line. Only the smaller nationalist SNS actually voted against the bailout. However, the failure of more than half the parliamentary deputies to support the measure led to its defeat and the fall of the government. Just a few days later, when early elections had been agreed on, the majority of government and opposition deputies united and approved the measure. The parliamentary elections of March 2012 returned a centre-left government to power, with Robert Fico leading a single-party government with a formal majority. Since then, Slovak government policies have resumed their clearly pro-EU attitude. The role of the EU agenda has changed to some extent as it becomes more prominent and emerges as a potential subject for political debate. Nevertheless, the added EU content has not led to more – or, at any rate, significantly more – political contest. In other words, political competition over the EU agenda remains low profile and EU matters have less salience than domestic issues.

The weak politicisation of the EU at the level of domestic politics is a general phenomenon. The EU agenda has often been depicted as a 'sleeping giant' (de Vries 2007) which does not interfere in domestic politics but rather represents dormant potential. For Slovakia, some country-specific conditions can be iden-

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49% of the country's respondents had trust in the EU. Moreover, half of those surveyed agreed with the view that the EU contributes to the achievement of a better life in Europe; two-thirds of Slovak citizens also agreed that the EU contributes to the social protection of its citizens while 63% said that the EU has sufficient power and tools to protect the economic interests of Europe on the global stage. See Standard Eurobarometer 82. Fall 2014. [http://ec.europa.eu/slovensko/news/eurobarometer82\\_sk.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/slovensko/news/eurobarometer82_sk.htm) More empirical evidence about the Slovak public's pro-EU bias can be found in the Standard Eurobarometer regular surveys available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm) (8 July 2015).

6 SaS said it was opposed to Slovakia's taxpayers being asked to cover the debts of richer countries. This opinion reflected the widespread public mood: many felt that Slovakia should not have to bail out countries like Greece, which were better off.



tified. Unlike the Czech Republic, where this sentiment was largely exhibited in the person of ex-president Václav Klaus, Slovakia did not display any open, party-based Euroscepticism and relevant public actors did not criticise EU integration. As Karen Henderson has pointed out of countries like Slovakia with a difficult accession trajectory: ‘the major EU debate was not about what Slovak parties wanted from the EU in policy terms, or what sort of EU they wanted, but rather about what the EU required from Slovakia and who could deliver it’ (Henderson 2009: 535). She notes further that ‘EU accession is a valence issue: it is generally accepted in the political discourse as a “good thing”, but the ability to achieve it is the contested political issue’ (Henderson 2009: 535).

After Slovakia’s accession to the EU, the broad consensus about the strategic importance of EU membership turned into a comfortable but passive consensus about the European agenda and Slovakia’s performance in the Union. This corresponds with the famous “permissive consensus” typical of established EU members in the earlier decades of their membership. Unsurprisingly, this situation stimulated no political or public discussion on EU matters; with only minor exceptions, these issues had no profile during those first years of EU membership either as part of the agenda of the political parties or in the public discourse.

Another consequence of the broad pre-accession consensus (and the very undeveloped and unstructured debate on the “pros” and “cons” of being part of the European Union) was that Slovakia’s membership was viewed mostly instrumentally. This was very much true not only for the political elites, but also for the broader public.

For Slovaks, EU membership was a means to finally escape from the wrong side of the “Iron Curtain” and achieve modernisation and EU funding benefits. On the other hand, it was not so much a way to improve the country’s international position or have a say in European matters. Slovaks were too inward-looking and had too limited an awareness of international affairs to claim those benefits.

The EU agenda proved more successful as a mass mobilisation tool for parties that managed to instrumentalise the EU as either a guarantee of economic improvements or a scapegoat for the misery. EU-critical or EU-sceptical positions were absent from the political mainstream. That situation changed in the 2012 national election. When the early general election took place because of the government’s collapse on EFSF vote, the EU agenda emerged as a new phenomenon in the domestic political competition. In addition to enthusiastic and more or less indifferent stances on the EU, some new faces of Euroscepticism emerged.

In the 2012 general election campaign, two different types of Euroscepticism – one nationalistic and the other (neo)liberal – surfaced and they continued to be its most visible faces in the 2014 EP election.

The sections below describe the content – both current and historical – of each of these stances.



## *The Nationalistic Version: the EU as an Enemy of National Sovereignty*

The textbook example of fringe nationalism being used against global institutions, the West and the EU can be found in the Slovak National Party (SNS)'s denunciation of EFSF as 'a mega-betrayal of the Slovak nation.' The nationalists' arguments went further to the loss of (national) sovereignty and the need to avoid being 'the servants of the West' (Vernost Slovensku., 2012: 1). Their Euroscepticism, thus, followed the "pattern" of radical right-wing parties such as the True Finns and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

In the 2012 election campaign, the SNS took as its theme 'rich Greeks or Italians living beyond their means and causing trouble to the poor who maintain tight budgets'; this was, it claimed, an 'ineffective principle for lazy countries to which the SNS will respond by requiring the introduction of a minimum average European labour cost and increasing salaries' (Vernost Slovensku., 2012: 3). Moreover, the SNS was the first parliamentary party to cross the Rubicon by considering the alternative of leaving the EU and Eurozone altogether. Its manifesto promised: 'in case of an urgent need to protect citizens' property and values and state sovereignty, we will consider leaving the EU and Eurozone' (Ibid.: 1).

As a party, the SNS fights for the rights of the nation state and labels others 'irresponsible' and unworthy of assistance. In 2012, it proclaimed: 'Various EU directives reduce the rights of individual countries in sovereign areas, such as the competencies and rights of parliament and the Slovak government guaranteed by the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. We disapprove of the false rescue of the European Monetary Union and of its change into a debt-ridden and unprofitable union. We say "no" to the endless increase in public debt resulting from "helping" irresponsible countries' (Ibid.: 2).

It is worth mentioning that these appeals against a solidarity contribution to the EFSF also enhanced the widespread Slovak self-image (self-stereotype) as a nation of poor people who had been tightening their belts for too long.<sup>7</sup>

As we have noted, the Eurosceptical appeals of nationalist parties were not rewarded with election votes – in either the 2012 early general election or the 2014 EP election. These outcomes also indicated a decline in the salience of the nationalist agenda, which was the key policy of the SNS as a typical single-issue party. Nationalism connected with anti-EU positions was no longer appealing enough. This was probably also because of the pro-EU bias that could be found among SNS voters as well (for more details see Gyárfášová – Krivý 2013).

According to the typology of Eurosceptical positions proposed by Kopecky and Mudde, the SNS and LSNS can be categorised as "Euro-rejects" (Kopecky – Mudde 2002). Their positions remain negative when it comes to both dimen-

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7 For example, the Slovak National Party (SNS) used the slogan: 'A Greek pension is € 1,600, an Italian teacher earns € 2,000. And where are we Slovaks?'

sions of the typology: they are not in favour of the EU at the level of diffuse support for EU integration or specific support through the practice of EU policies. As for the sources of their Euroscepticism, nationalistic parties make appeals related to sovereignty and cultural divisions. Though they highlight some economic issues, this is more at the level of threats to the national interest and/or identity than rational cost-benefit calculations.

### *The Neoliberal Version: the EU as the Road to Socialism*

For liberals, the EU, with its solidarity and bailout plan, is irrational and denies rational free market economic principles. The SaS also rejects deeper integration since this 'can lead to a reduction of the sovereignty of Member States' (Volebný program SaS., 2012: 56). The party, thus, supports applying 'stricter and enforceable sanctions to not only small or less important states but also the EU giants, Germany and France' (Ibid.).

SaS's neo-liberal attitude has met with a positive response from the younger generation, which is rich in social capital. On the other hand, the party is not supported by those marginalised by integration. This type of Euroscepticism is based on economic reductionism and "worship" for the invisible hand of the market. SaS's argument has two dimensions: the first is moral; it sees the bailout as a moral hazard because it punishes those who comply with the rules and 'the European Union has taken the path of supporting the irresponsible at the expense of those responsible' (Všetci za Brusel..., 2014: 4). The second is economic and holds that in any case these measures are not efficient and 'we need to (1) keep the internal market (2) repair the mistakes, in particular, in the context of the Monetary Union, (3) avoid the risks of unnecessary centralisation (banking, fiscal, political union)' (Ibid.: 9). These positions trap these liberals into national egoism and chauvinism. On this basis, one might be quite sceptical about the liberal nature of the party because Euroscepticism does not befit those liberals who have positioned themselves within the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). The decision of SaS's only MEP, Richard Sulik to move to the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) was, thus, a logical step.

Again applying the Kopecký – Mudde typology (2002), we may see SaS as genuine EU-sceptics since they support EU integration at the level of ideas and ideals, however, they are critical of specific EU practices such as the EFSF mechanism. They also oppose too much harmonisation and centralisation within the EU. The sources of this Euroscepticism are at least twofold: political and economic based on a clearly neo-liberal background that rejects the ideas of solidarity and political union.

SaS continued its consistent criticism of the EU in the 2014 European campaign while vehemently refuting the label of Euroscepticism. In addition to criti-

cising the bailout fund and other aspects of economic integration, liberals gave voice to a very extensive range of Euro-myths about quotas on flushing toilets and high-powered vacuums and a ban on sugar-enhanced juices and the like. Moreover, SaS titled its party manifesto 'Everyone's for Brussels; we're for you,' reinforcing the widespread stereotypes of "them in Brussels" and "us at home" and a "Brussels doesn't matter to us" attitude (SaS party manifesto, 2014).

In the 2014 EP election, SaS received 6.7% of votes, sending its leader Richard Sulík to EP. This was a slightly better result than the one recorded by the party in the 2012 general election, but much lower than its showing in the 2010 general election (12.1%). The nationalists, in contrast, did not reach the 5% threshold.

## 2014 EP Election Results

Although the governing party Smer-SD won the election with 24% of the vote, its performance fell well short of the one five years earlier (not to mention its success in the 2012 early parliamentary elections where it had achieved 44%). Smer-SD now has four MEPs, who strengthen the EU Socialist Group. The centre-right Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) each successfully defended two seats. The Party of the Hungarian Community also remains in the EP although it only has one seat. These three parties are established members of the European People's Party (EPP). The newcomers to the EP with just one member each are Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) and NOVA (both joining the ECR group) as well as Most-Híd (EPP) and SaS (initially an ALDE member, which changed to ECR a few months after the election). These results reflect the current situation on the Slovak political scene, with a strong party on the Left and a fragmented centre-right spectrum. We must, however, note the difficulty of drawing far-reaching conclusions about current levels of support for individual parties based on these results. This is not only because of the critically low voter turnout, but due to the fact that these elections were not contested by the newly established Siet' (Network) party, which is performing significantly better in public opinion polls than any of the centre-right parties.

**Table 1: Election results for three EP elections in Slovakia**

	% of valid votes			Number of seats in EP		
	2004	2009	2014	2004	2009	2014
Smer- SD	16.0	32.0	24.1	3	5	4
KDH	16.2	10.9	13.2	3	2	2
SDKÚ-DS	17.1	17.0	7.8	3	2	2
NOVA-KDS-OKS	X	X	6.8	X	X	1
SaS	X	4.6	6.7	X	0	1
SMK	13.2	11.3	6.5	2	2	1
Most-Híd	X	X	5.8	X	X	1
TIP	X	X	3.8	X	X	0
SNS	2.0	5.6	3.6	0	1	0
LS-NS	X	X	1.7	X	x	0
HZDS	17.0	9.0	x	3	1	0

Notes: X = Party did not exist or did not run.

Source: Statistical Office of the SR.

## Why Didn't Euroscepticism Succeed in the EP Election?

Slovakia has attracted expert attention more for its critically low voter turnout than for the election results themselves. In 2004, that turnout reached 17%; five years later it had increased to 19.6% only to sink to an all-time low in 2014. What were the reasons for this non-participation? The Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) asked this question in a representative post-election survey.<sup>8</sup> Although such survey-based ex-post self-explanations and rationalisations have methodological limits, the responses point to some interesting findings and comparisons. The most frequently stated reasons for abstention related specifically to the EP elections and the EU: 39% of non-voters expressed those reasons in an open-ended survey question (Table 2). IVO conducted a similar survey after the 2009 EP elections when EU-related abstention factors were reported by only 16% of the then non-voters. Instead, the most common responses related to domestic politics or politics in general rather than the EP elections specifically (for example, political frustration, dissatisfaction, disenchantment and the like). As such, we can conclude that in recent years, the reasons for ignoring the EP elections have been “Europeanised”; they are anchored less in domestic politics and more in the meaning and implications of the specific election, EU institutions and last but not least, the work of MEPs. This also means

<sup>8</sup> The Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) conducted a survey of a representative sample of 1,000 respondents – adult residents of Slovakia shortly after the EP election in early June 2014.

that there are now more pronounced complaints against the EU itself. On the other hand, compared to 2009, factors related to general distrust of politicians have weakened. At the same time, the 2014 survey repeatedly confirmed that abstention is not related to a lack of information. Rather, the issue was a lack of relevance, thus confirming the second-order election theory – the view that less is at stake – which was identified by K. Reif and H. Schmitt more than 30 years ago (Reif – Schmitt 1980).

**Table 2: Self-declared reasons for abstention in the EP election 2014 (in %)**

<b>Objective reasons</b> ( <i>illness, needing to travel, work etc</i> )	28 (30)
<b>Not interested in voting generally; abstention as a policy</b> ( <i>'I never show up'; 'I'm not interested in politics.'</i> )	23 (29)
<b>Reservations about this particular election, the EU, EP and/or MEPs</b> ( <i>'...because senior politicians get a good rest in EP for big money'; 'in all these years, no MEP has ever come to visit us and inform us about what they have done for our benefit and our community'; 'I don't even know their policies and how they work'; 'I have no confidence in parliament, and I'm disappointed by the way our representatives work in EP'; 'I don't understand why I should vote'; 'these elections are important for the politicians, not for voters.'</i> )	39 (16)
<b>Distrust of politicians in general</b> ( <i>'Politicians have disappointed me - promises, promises ... and still the same faces'; 'I'm not interested in politics'; 'I do know the politicians and I don't trust them, I have been disappointed so many times that I don't trust them'; 'It's just a waste of time; all of them are the same, and they mislead the public.'</i> )	5 (11)
<b>Lack of information, insufficient campaigning</b> ( <i>'I don't understand how European institutions work'; 'there was no campaign.'</i> )	1 (6)
<b>I do not know, do not remember</b>	4 (8)

Note: Open-ended question with a maximum of one response. The quotes in italics are taken from questionnaire responses. Figures in brackets are from 2009.

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, 2009 and 2014.

Interestingly, these people's critical attitudes were not reflected in Euro-critical voices and votes for Eurosceptical parties. Rather, people expressed their opinions and criticisms of the EU and EP through abstention. Furthermore, many of these citizens were not convinced about the relevance of European elections. In their view, therefore, the problem was not the "second-order-ness" of the European elections, but rather their uselessness and irrelevance. As such, they did not even endorse parties promising consistent criticism or rejection of the EU.

EU elections are usually understood as the most sophisticated level of elections where participation is primarily the result of cognitive mobilisation (cf. van der Eijk – Franklin 1996; Franklin 2007). This can also be confirmed by looking at the regional and socio-demographic distribution of electoral participation in Slovakia: participation was above average in the capital, Bratislava, which has the highest concentration of social capital. From a socio-demographic point of view, the differentiating features were education and age in particular.

The strongest constituencies were people aged over 55 years while the weakest bracket was 18–24-years old. People with a university education participated more often than those with only a primary education.

In terms of the stability vs. volatility of voting behaviour, we can distinguish three groups essentially: a) party-loyal voters; b) “swinging” voters; and c) abstaining voters (non-voters). Turning to the EP elections and specific voting trends related to second-order elections, we find that the phenomenon of transferred votes (“swinging voters”) is prevalent in many countries. Electorates often use these elections to express dissatisfaction and “punish” their government and ruling parties, particularly if the European election is held in the middle of a national electoral cycle and the ruling parties are highly unpopular (due to the so-called mid-term slump). On the other hand, electoral gains are recorded by smaller parties (fringe Eurosceptical parties) which utilise the Eurosceptical, anti-EU mobilisation. As several studies have shown (cf. Reif – Schmitt 1980, Marsh 1998, Franklin 2007), the reason lies in sincere rather than strategic voting (“voting with the heart”) because – again – less is at stake. Extremist and Eurosceptical parties mobilise voters by riding on a wave of dissatisfaction with the EU, but this may only be a “placeholder” for dissatisfaction with solutions at national level. The 2014 EP elections provide clear evidence of these phenomena in many countries. The electoral success of the parties would not have been possible without the mobilising of voters from mainstream camps.

Slovakia is a different case: a post-election survey did not confirm significant voter shifts between the political parties. In other words, there was considerable consistency between the election results at European and national levels. The outcomes for the political parties in the European elections were determined by their ability to mobilise their own followers rather than to gain the backing of “flighty” voters. A high percentage of voters in the EP elections recently noted that they would select the same party at national level (Table 3).<sup>9</sup> The proportion of party loyalists ranged from 100% in the case of the Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK) to 62% for both the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party, which is declining in popularity, and the relatively new political entity – Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO). Voters who would not select the same party did not intend to switch to any particular party but were rather undecided or did not plan to vote in the general election.

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9 This is based on a combination of voters' choices in the EP election and their voting intention in a potential upcoming general election.

**Table 3: Consistency between EP election voting and party support at national level (voting intention in general elections)**

Party supported in the EP election	Party loyalty (intention to support the same party in the general election, in %)
SMK	100
SaS	88
Smer- SD	86
KDH	85
NOVA-KDS-OKS	80
Most-Híd	78
SDKÚ-DS	62
OĽaNO	62

Note: Only includes parties which entered EP in 2014.  
Source: EES 2014.

To summarise voting trends among Slovak voters in the 2014 EP election, we may say:

- In 2014, there was no major volatility (i.e. neither deep nor superficial variability) between the national and European levels => the election results were mostly determined by different level of mobilisation, and not the ability of the parties to attract swinging voters;<sup>10</sup>
- Euroscepticism did not mobilise Slovak voters, and many of those who did not show up to the polls explained their abstention through their critical stances towards the EU and/or EP. In other words, they were critical of the EU but did not express their views by casting a vote for any of the EU-critical parties; and
- Voting decisions in the EP elections replicated voting choices at national level, however with a substantially lower turnout; Slovakia’s Euro-gap<sup>11</sup> reached 46 percentage points.

## The EU Agenda for Parties and Voters

The EP elections provide a unique laboratory test when it comes to the comparative analysis of voting behaviour and political communication in “older” and “newer” post-Communist member states. One general pattern has emerged

10 The same was true for the 2009 EP election. For more details, see Gyárfášová (2009).

11 The Euro-gap is the difference between the turnout in first-order and second-order elections. In the 2012 parliamentary election, the turnout equalled 59.1 % of eligible voters.



across all three elections so far: in spite of their years of yearning for EU membership, citizens of post-Communist countries have not been very enthusiastic about exercising their newly acquired rights as EU citizens. The average voter turnout has been significantly lower than in the older EU member states. New EU citizens from post-Communist countries have, thus, relegated the “second-order” elections to an even lower position.

The 2014 elections also showed that after a decade of EU membership, the profiles of political parties on the EU agenda are slowly emerging. In the current configuration, the centre-left party Smer-SD has a clearly pro-European profile while the fragmented centre-right party spectrum is closer to the Euro-critical pole. As has been mentioned, among the mainstream parties we can also identify two different modes of Euroscepticism. Around the time of Slovakia’s EU accession, experts clearly ranked the centre-right SDKÚ-DS as the most pro-EU political party, but in 2010 it was replaced in this role by Smer-SD.<sup>12</sup> However, commentators have also pointed to a certain shallowness and largely instrumental character to Smer’s Euro-optimism. Nevertheless, the debate on the EU is more present and visible than in 2009 (Gabrižová – Geist 2014: 24). The recent correlation between left- and right-wing orientations and pro-EU and anti-EU positions need not be fixed.

Another view of the political parties’ positions on the substantive issues on the European agenda is offered by the EUvox project.<sup>13</sup> Within this project, domestic experts coded the positions of the 10 most relevant Slovak political parties on 30 European agenda issues that were divided across three axes: economic, social and cultural. It was found that across 30 different statements, the greatest consensus was reached about Slovakia’s membership of the Economic and Monetary Union and the rejection of tax harmonisation and redistribution via Euro-funds. The most controversial issue was the bailout, that is, whether the member states should provide assistance to countries finding themselves in a budget crisis. EUvox also revealed some incoherence and inconsistencies in the positions of the political parties. Moreover, the parties did not have positions on many issues (e.g. environmental matters and common security policies). The project clearly identified extreme-right nationalistic party ĽS-NS as the most anti-EU party followed by the radical nationalistic SNS and neo-liberal SaS.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Series, 2006 and 2010. See [http://www.unc.edu/~gwmkmarks/data\\_pp.php](http://www.unc.edu/~gwmkmarks/data_pp.php)

13 EUVOX was a EU-wide voting advice application (VAA) for the 2014 European Parliament elections. Its purpose was to help citizens select the political party best matching their own policy preferences and enable them to quickly access information about the positions of all relevant parties contesting these crucial elections. For more details, visit: [www.euvox.eu](http://www.euvox.eu)

14 This could be seen from several indicators, but it was most evident from party positions on the statement “Overall, EU membership has been a bad thing for Slovakia.”

To what extent are voters able to decode parties' positions on EU issues? Based on an EES post-election survey,<sup>15</sup> we observed in 2009 that more than 30% of respondents could not indicate the position of the political parties on the anti-EU vs. pro-EU axis (Gyárfášová 2009). By 2014, this awareness had definitely increased: "do not know" responses were about 10% on average. However, there was relatively little differentiation among the parties' positions remained (Table 4). SaS was not seen as Eurosceptical at all; unfortunately we do not have results for SNS. Nevertheless, we can say that though there was more awareness of party positions on the EU agenda, the differences among the parties were not very significant to the public.

In addition, we may point to an interesting phenomenon that is evident when we compare two other levels of party evaluation: on the one hand, voters perceived their preferred parties to be far more pro-EU than the general public did. On the other hand, voters saw themselves as being far less pro-European than the parties which they voted for in the EP elections. This "mismatch" deserves more attention in future surveys.

**Table 4: Positions of political parties on the EU issue as perceived by the public (measured on a 0–10 scale)<sup>16</sup>**

Party	Party's position on EU integration - as seen by the public	Party's position - as seen by its supporters in the EP elections	Voters' self-placement
NOVA	4.6	7.5	4.5
Smer-SD	4.5	8.0	4.7
OĽaNO	4.2	6.9	4.1
KDH	3.8	7.5	4.6
SaS	3.6	7.4	4.9
Most-Híd	3.6	6.7	5.3
SDKÚ-DS	3.3	6.8	4.3
SMK	2.9	8.1	3.5

Note: Only includes parties which entered EP in 2014.

Source: EES 2014.

These findings show that there is very little congruence among the public and party supporters when it comes to perceptions of the parties. Further, the low level of differentiation in perceptions of the parties could be one factor influenc-

<sup>15</sup> For more details, visit: <http://eeshomepage.net/ees-2009-study>.

<sup>16</sup> The wording of the question was as follows: 'Some say that European unification should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What is your opinion? Please give your views on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means unification "has already gone too far" and 10 means it "should be pushed further." What number on this scale best describes the party's position?'

ing voting choices. Eurosceptical appeals are not visible to voters they do not follow them. Moreover, voters see their preferred parties as being more pro-EU than they would rate themselves.

## Conclusions

Signs of the rising relevance of the EU agenda along with growing Euroscepticism in Slovak politics cannot be overlooked. Among the reasons for these shifts are crises related to the euro and/or debt as well as a quest for solidarity, which is not popular, especially when citizens feel obliged to show solidarity with those who are richer and better off. Yet, despite the fact that EU issues were more visible and two different types of Euroscepticism could be identified, Euro-critical appeals did not mobilise Slovak voters in the 2014 EP elections and Slovakia – for the third time – finished with the lowest voter turnout across all the member states. This study has been able to identify several explaining factors:

The EU arena is still perceived as a sphere where there is less at stake, and therefore the main political “battlefield” and source of power is politics at national level. Political parties behave accordingly: in spite of the greater visibility of EU content, the EU contest is very weak, and even Eurosceptical positions are separate monologues rather than part of a political debate or discourse. The positions of most political parties are fuzzy on many issues, and in some cases they simply do not exist.

So far, the politicisation of EU issues – in the case of ESFS, for example – seems to represent a temporary episode rather than a long-term shift, and the impact on voting behavior has been weak.

The relevance of the “EU factor” is increasing, but it has yet to be fully developed as an independent dividing issue in the political competition; it is stuck between its previous irrelevance and expected future salience.

Political parties’ stances on the issue are still not very visible to the public. Moreover, the public does not see big differences among the parties. Voters perceive their chosen parties as being more pro-EU than they are themselves.

The EU agenda has been used more successfully as a mass mobilisation tool when parties have managed to invoke the EU as either a guarantee of improved economic conditions or a scapegoat for economic misery. This was the case for the governing Smer-SD party, which was the clear winner of the 2014 EP election. The pro-European stance of the Slovak Social Democrats instrumentalises the EU for several purposes: to strengthen the image of the party with a guarantee of social stability and security as well as a guarantee of political stability. As such, the party defines itself in opposition to those adopting anti-European attitudes in order to pursue their own political interests. The Social Democrats, thus, draw an image of the EU as a co-protector of the national interest. Though the EU-optimistic Smer-SD party was indeed the unambiguous winner of the

EP election, this landslide victory was not recorded thanks to its pro-EU stance. Rather, it was due to its offer of social security and better economic conditions. The EU served as an additional pragmatic instrument to appeal to an electorate yearning for more social and economic security. And voters rewarded this approach. This implies that when it comes to perceptions of the EU, a utilitarian model (still) has more explanatory force (“it’s for the economy, stupid!”) than any other approach. However, enjoying the benefits of the EU does not give people any motivation to participate in EU democracy.

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